

# For Everything Else

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Category: How to Train Your Dragon

Genre: Adventure, Romance

Language: English

Characters: Astrid, Hiccup

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2013-03-02 02:07:23

Updated: 2013-09-08 08:37:48

Packaged: 2016-04-26 14:37:07

Rating: T

Chapters: 3

Words: 21,905

Publisher: [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

Summary: He was useless, he was a walking disaster, but, Astrid admitted to herself, he was nice; definitely nicer than his cousin, and ten times as smart. The promised return to "This Time, For Sure."

## 1. Chapter 1

**\*\*Ok, guys. Here I go. I said I might be returning to This Time, For Sure, and I am. At the same time, I will be posting a sequel story. There goes my free time. And my GPA.\*\***

**\*\*Also, I will be adding my version of the deleted scene between Astrid and Hiccup (since some lines are absorbed elsewhere) because it works so beautifully, and it's a pity they cut it out simply because of time. If you have not seen it, you need to, because the scene will make more sense that way. [www . youtube watch?v=zdxlj2l0fws](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdxlj2l0fws)\*\***

**\*\*And I am definitely going to be that person who asks for reviews. Just this once, because my birthday was Monday, and I do enjoy belated gifts as much as the next crazed writer. So be kind and spread a little love. Don't worry, I'll never ask again.\*\***

**\*\*I do not own How to Train Your Dragon, though I wish with all of my heart that I owned Toothless. Hiccup would not be a bad addition. A nice, pocket-sized Hiccup to make sarcastic remarks all day...That would be lovely.\*\***

### Chapter 1:

Astrid groaned softly in a poor attempt to tell the voices to stop. Why did people have to be so loud in the mornings? She pulled her blanket over her head and curled up in a ball, desperate to stay in her warm bed and catch at least a few more minutes of sleep.

Something outside crashed and screams resounded throughout the village.

What on earth was wrong with those Vikings? They were acting as if they were being attacked byâ€œ"

She sat up quickly and jumped out of her bed before running to her window and throwing open the shutters. Almost immediately, she was nearly blinded by an explosion caused by a Hideous Zippleback igniting a gassed house not far from her own. She quickly slammed the shutters closed and leaned her hands against the boards.

"Dragons..." she murmured as a smile crossed her face. Her heart beat furiously inside her chest and she ran to the chest as the foot of her bed and pushed up the top. After a few moments of searching in the dark, her fingers finally grazed over her pauldrons and she pulled them out and pinned them to her top. She stood up, let the trunk lid fall closed and grabbed her skirt and belt off the foot of the bed. As she fastened the skirt and adjusted the belt so her leather pouch was on her right hip, she stepped into her boots, wiggling her feet around until the legs straightened around her calves. She then grabbed her head band and held it between her teeth as she quickly braided her hair back and tied it with a small strip of leather. She tied the headband and pulled her bangs free as she scurried down the stairs to the main room of the house. For a moment she wondered how her brothers, Grimefoot and Splinter, could have possibly left the house without waking her, but she quickly forgot the thought when the former and younger of the two burst through the front door, his face flushed in the dying firelight, his eyes wide and bright with excitement.

"Hurry up!" He gasped. "You're missing all the action!"

"Why are you back, then?" she asked.

Grimefoot reached around the side door and pulled a large hammer from the shadows. "Mom's commandeered my battle axe. Figured I should come back for this." He grinned at her under his yellow mustache. His beard was not fully grown, as he was only seventeen, but he was proud of the hair he did have. Grimefoot still lived with Astrid and her parents and her brother Splinter, unlike the older two brothers who were both married and living in their own homes.

Astrid grabbed a short sword off the table, but Grimefoot ran over and snatched it from her. "Not tonight, little sister. You're on water duty, as usual."

She stamped her foot. "Again? But, I can help! I want to fight!"

Grimefoot held up his hands just in front of his shoulders. "I don't make these calls. Take it up with Stoick."

"I can fight," she insisted.

He laughed. "You can hit trees. Dragons are different. They don't wait for you to hit them." He cocked his head toward the door. "Let's go."

She followed him into the cold of morning and pondered why on earth the village had not moved to a warmer climate with fewer pests years ago. Generations of reconstruction and war, yet they had stayed. They were Vikings, she supposed, and Vikings were stubborn and strong.

And she was above all things a Viking. "I can fight just as well as anyone else, and you know it," she grumbled, not bothering to add that she was better than most. They both knew.

Grimefoot grabbed her arm and pulled her against the side of a house while a Gronckle flew by. "I'm not the one to argue with, I told you." Once the way was clear, he darted out from behind the house. "Besides, Dad would gut me if I let you do something like that and you got yourself killed."

"I wouldn't get myselfâ€"

"And," he interrupted, "you start training in a few days. You'll knock 'em dead." He lifted his arm and threw his hammer as a Deadly Nadder flew by. The stone head hit the dragon's head and the beast fell to the ground. "Literally." He turned to face her. "Now, get to the square. They need you. And Thorhalla needs me. She was having some bad Zippleback trouble last I checked."

"Is that all you're planning on helping her with?" she quipped.

His eyes widened. "Who did youâ€" Who have you been talkingâ€"

She stuck her tongue out at him as she ran past.

"Astrid!" he called after her, but she did not turn back. She enjoyed having the last word, as she did not get that privilege often, being the youngest of five children. Besides, it was so easy to tease Grimefoot about his relationship with Thorhalla. They were not an official couple, but Astrid knew where he went at night.

She reached into her pouch as she ran and pulled out two long strips of cloth, which she began wrapping around her hands and wrists and arms. She needed extra protection against fire and debris.

She jumped over a ledge and ran down a street, skidding around a corner and bounding into the town square. She jogged up to the group of kids her age, all gathered around a huge barrel of sea water, collected specifically for the purpose of quenching flames.

"Astrid!"

She fought against the urge to groan at the sound of Snotlout's voice. He was a good fighter, she'd grant him that, and he was good at throwing axes and had a decent amount of strength and could handle a spear with accuracy, but he was without a doubt one of the more annoying people on the island. She truly wished he would stop his useless flirting and boasting. She would never look his way, not when she had more important things to worry about, like training herself to become the best Viking of her age group.

"Astrid, I'm so glad you're here. I mean, I've been handling it on my

own, and I could totally continue to do that, but you'reâ€œ"

"Where should we start?" Astrid interrupted, looking to Ruffnut.

The other girl shrugged and gestured around the burning plaza. "Take your pick."

Astrid glanced at the buildings and spotted the fire closest to the smithy. That fire could not spread. If Gobber's shop burned down, they would be short on weapon repairs, and that was not an ideal situation for a raid. "I'll take that one," she said, quickly assuming control since someone had to, and she was the most capable. "Snotlout and Tuffnut: take that one over there." She pointed to a huge barn that had caught light. The food had to be saved. "Ruffnut and Fishlegs..." She pointed to a pile of burning hay next to the fishmonger's hut. "Take that one. Alright, let's go!"

The kids immediately sprang into action, grabbing buckets and running to the barrel to fill them with brine.

"Come on! Hurry up!" she shouted to prod them along.

Ruffnut and Tuffnut ran away from the barrel, fighting over a single bucket, screaming at each other and throwing insults. Fishlegs moved as fast as his little legs could carry his enormous frame. Snotlout shot a wink in her direction as he ran toward his own fire. Astrid simply rolled her eyes and filled her bucket. She looked up as water sloshed against the sides and thought for a moment that she had seen a small face lean out the smithy window.

Hiccup.

He was inside, which was good. Bad things always happened when he went outside. He had too many ideas, and those ideas always blew up in his faceâ€œsometimes literally. Perhaps he would not be seen as such a nuisance if he were to stop trying so hard. But she did understand his motives, at least. He was the chief's son, and next in line, and he had quite a bit to live up to. Stoick the Vast had very large shoes to fill. She often felt the same way, though to a lesser extent. Being from a huge family, she sometimes felt lost among the huge strapping boys and warrior-like parents, occasionally overlooked. So she strived to be the best, and she was the best, and everyone knew it. The main difference between herself and Hiccup was that she knew what she was doing, and he did not. He was as far from a typical Viking as Hel was from Folkvangr.

She stood up and ran with her barrel to the fire and threw her water on the flames, turning around as a Gronckle caused a huge explosion in the exact spot she had just tried to wet. In spite of the fact that her efforts had been rendered useless, the feeling of being in the midst of so much excitement made her smile. The other kids came along side her and they all jogged past the smithy window. She tried her hardest to ignore the smaller boy as he leaned out the window and watched them. A part of her felt bad for him, but she understood that Hiccup was a disaster when he was let outside.

"Astrid, that was so awesome! You didn't even flinch when that Gronckle came near you..." Snotlout flexed his arm. "Yeah I took out that fire, by myself. It was easy andâ€œ"

"No, you didn't, numbnuts," Tuffnut said. "I was there."

Snotlout glared at the male twin. "Ok, you were \_there\_, butâ€"

"There's more to do," Astrid stated. Sometimes she wanted to punch Snotlout, but always decided that he was just not worth the effort. She also had a tendency to wonder if he was really related to Hiccup, for the two were about as different as night and day. Snotlout was big and brawny and dark with small blue eyes, and Hiccup was tiny and pale with deep auburn hair and big...She realized that she actually did not know exactly what colour Hiccup's eyes were, not that it particularly \_mattered\_. Hiccup's eyes would never make an impact on her, and it was useless to wonder about them. The boys were different in other ways, as well. Snotlout was strong, and, as much as she hated to admit it, a good fighter; he was, however, exceedingly obnoxious and arrogant and had a tendency to get in her way far too much. Hiccup on the other hand, got in \_everyone's \_way, and he was weak and useless and full of ideas that only ever ended in trouble. Hiccup did have one advantage over his cousin, she allowed. He was, above all things, nice. Never a pejorative word, never a bout of anger. And though his ideas were more troublesome than anything else, he was quite clever and could make a decent conversation.

Or so she had heard. She herself had never really spoken to him beyond handing him family weapons to sharpen. At least for the past few years. They had been friends before situation and skill had driven them apart.

She put her bucket under the stream of brine.

Perhaps she should try talking to him one day. Gobber often spoke of the boy's sarcastic sense of humour and quick wit. Reviving a friendship with the boy might be worth the time, if it meant she could talk to someone her age with some level of intelligence.

She stood up with her full bucket and raced toward another fire.

She decided that extending a hand to Hiccup was too much trouble. She had more important things to focus on, like getting Stoick to approve her for dragon training.

Astrid thrust her bucket forward, letting the water fly and fall on the flames.

She dashed back to the barrel.

Fishlegs ran up and bent over with his hands on his knees. "Not doing much good..." He glanced around sharply, like a frightened squirrel.

Astrid looked at the square and had to agree with him. Too many fires, too few of them. The strategy of having each kid tackle a separate blaze was backfiring: flames were spreading faster than they could douse them. She bit her lip in frustration. If they had just one extra pair of hands they could probably start a rotation of sorts, but that extra pair of hands would be attached to Hiccup the Useless, as the village not so lovingly called him. She could always try to find one of the younger boys or girls, recruit some more kids

to the patrol, but doing so would take too much time. "We'll take one building at a time," she said.

The other kids arrived and she repeated, "We'll take one building at a time. Everyone fill up, and head to that one!" She pointed to the still-raging fire near the smithy. "Hurry up!"

Snotlout sauntered over to her while the other three teens filled their buckets. "So, babe, after this, we should definitelyâ€"

"Not the time," she said as she jogged over to the barrel and filled her own bucket before running off in the same direction Ruffnut, Tuffnut, and Fishlegs had gone.

She flung the bucket forward, aiming the stream of water at the base of the flames, and turned back for a refill, but just before she reached the barrel, someone screamed, "NIGHT FURY!"

"GET DOWN!" someone else cried.

She grabbed Tuffnut, who was barely an arm's length from her, and pulled him with her as she threw herself against a wall. She squeezed her eyes shut, as if not being able to see the world would make the unholy offspring of lightning and death unable to see her as well.

The Night Fury was the most feared of all the dragons. It would come, silent and invisible in the night, then release a very distinct scream before firing a single shot of blinding light that would explode into a mighty inferno. The shot never missed. No one knew why Night Furies appeared during raids, as they never took food, unlike Gronckles or Nadders.

Gronckles were tough, huge, and bulging. Their bodies seemed to be large barrels with bulbous heads and tails. Deadly Nadders were quick and powerful, covered in spikes. They used their tails to shoot poisoned spines at their opponents, and the poison had a paralysis effect. Hideous Zipplebacks were marked by their two heads, one that breathed gas and another that ignited the air. Monstrous Nightmares were particularly dangerous and known for setting themselves on fire, making direct combat extremely difficult. Most left those beasts to Stoick the Vast. Occasionally a Changewing would make an appearance, and Astrid was glad that one had not been spotted. Those dragons sprayed acid, and the burns would keep the Goths and healers busy for weeks.

Her eldest brother, Datter, had a Changewing scar on his shoulder. The skin was red and white and black and covered in wrinkles and deep impressions. He had another scar on his left bicep, raised and puffy, from being sprayed with boiling water during a fight with a Scauldron. His greatest scar was one that ran diagonally across his chest, given to him by the Monstrous Nightmare he had fought during his dragon training final exam years ago. Datter's body, in fact, was covered by the marks of battle. His favourite phrase was "It's only fun if you get a scar out of it."

Grimefoot and Splinter thought Datter was crazy, dancing with death during every battle in which he engaged, refusing to end it until his opponent had given him some sort of trophy.

Astrid thought he was wonderful. Each blemish told a story, each line a mark of valor, and she envied him. She wanted her own scars, her own proof of bravery and strength, in spite of the pain that came with them.

She opened her eyes when she heard shouts once more. The night fury had gone, inflicting damage and fleeing for a few minutes. She jumped up, using Tuffnut's shoulder as an aid and pushing him into the ground.

As she ran back to the giant barrel, she saw Gobber the Belch dash out of the smithy and she shot a nervous glance at the building. She spied the back of Hiccup's head through the window and let out a sigh of relief.

Perhaps he'd have the good sense to stay inside for once.

"Fire patrol!"

Astrid's head snapped up and she saw her brothers Grimefoot and Splinter running towards her.

Splinter pulled an axe from behind his back and held it out as he skidded to a stop in front of his sister. "We're moving to the lower defenses. Mom was worried you wouldn't be able to protect yourself when we've all moved to the catapults."

Astrid grabbed the axe handle and ran a hand over the stone head. Her mother's axe was a bit off-balance, but she had learned to work with it.

"Astrid!" An older girl with masses of tight red curls ran up. "Get all of you out of here. Go somewhere safe."

She shook her head. "We can't abandon this job."

Grimefoot put a hand on the girl's shoulder. "Splinter made the stupid mistake of giving her a weapon before this conversation. We can't win this, Thorhalla." He winked at Astrid and grabbed his brother's arm. "She can take care of herself."

Splinter ruffled Astrid's hair. "Stay safe, little sister."

The two blonde Hofferson boys and the Egilsdatter girl dashed off, toward the docks where the catapults were stationed.

Astrid took a deep breath and looked around. The storehouse was out of danger, a couple of the barns were safe, and all other buildings were lost causes. Perhaps moving to a more secure location was a good idea. "We're falling back!" she barked. "To the forest! Move!"

The kids ran for the trees with Tuffnut taking the lead and Fishlegs falling behind, all as usual. Astrid took up the rear, looking behind her occasionally to be certain there was no threat trailing them.

"You know, Astrid," Snotlout began as he slowed his pace to match her, "once this whole thing is over, we could..."

She opened her mouth to tell him off, but she accidentally inhaled a

huge amount of smoke and ended up coughing instead. Snotlout reached out as if to pat her back, but she held up a firm hand. Just as she had climbed over a huge boulder that lay at the entrance to the woods, she heard a long scream coming from the village.

She turned around and brandished her mother's axe, ready to jump back over the boulder and run into the village to defend whoever needed assistance. Then she saw a figure being chased by a huge Monstrous Nightmare.

Long, lanky arms and legs and...Oh, gods. He was out.

When did he escape?

She hoisted herself onto the boulder, but Ruffnut grabbed her arm. "Are you crazy?" the Thorston girl hissed. "It's a Monstrous Nightmare!"

"He needs help!" Astrid said.

"Just leave him," Snotlout said in an offhanded way. "He might not make it, but that will save us a bunch of trouble."

Astrid watched as Hiccup pressed himself against the huge beam that held up one of the giant torches and turned to Snotlout to ask him how he could be so calloused.

"But...If she lets Hiccup die," Fishlegs began, "who's going to be the next chief?"

"Duh!" Snotlout rolled his eyes and pointed his thumb at his chest. "My dad's second in command! Obviously, me!"

Astrid turned back around. She absolutely had to save Hiccup. Her sanity was at stake. And the future of Berk, which was vastly more important. She hauled herself on top of the boulder and almost jumped down, but she stopped when she saw the huge form of their chief grab the beast by the horns and throw it to the ground.

He had the situation covered.

Astrid sat down on the rock to watch.

The dragon spat a small amount of fire and then looked at Stoick sheepishly.

"He's all out," she murmured.

Stoick ran forward and punched the Nightmare square in the jaw.

"He's amazing," Fishlegs whispered behind her.

Astrid nodded.

The other kids gathered to the side of the boulder to watch the brief scuffle between Stoick and the dragon. After a few moments, the beast launched itself into the sky and flew away. Stoick turned around and looked at the burning beam.



Tuffnut shook his head. "He's so gonna get it."

The beam could not take the weight, and the charred wood collapsed on itself before falling over. The torch came loose and fell down the carefully constructed scaffolding along the cliffside. With each crash, Hiccup visibly winced.

"Sorry...Dad."

Snotlout cackled. "Boy, is he ever!"

Astrid sighed. Hiccup had abandoned his post at the forge and had left an absurd amount of destruction in his wake. Hardly unusual. When would he learn his place?

The villagers slowly made their way to the town square.

Hiccup looked at the horizon as dragons carried off their spoils: yaks, chickens, fish, and a whole net of sheep. "Ok," he said in his awkward, nasal mumble, "but I hit a Night Fury."

Astrid groaned. Was he really going to try to pull it off again?

Stoick clearly had the same thoughts, as he merely grabbed his son by the collar of his shirt and dragged him up the hill.

"Gah...It's not like the last few times, Dad!" Hiccup protested, though he put up very little resistance. Or maybe he was resisting, but his attempts were so futile one would never notice. "I mean, I really actually hit it! You guys were busy, and I had a very clear shot!"

Tuffnut leaned in to Ruffnut. "Are we really going to hear this again?"

"It went down just off Raven Point. Let's get a search party out there before itâ€" "

"Stop!" Stoick shouted.

Hiccup pressed his lips together and looked around, as if beseeching some sort of help.

Stoick sighed. "Just...stop. Every time you step outside, disaster follows!"

"Couldn't agree more," Snotlout said as he leaned close to Astrid's face.

She roughly shoved him back.

"Can you not see that I have bigger problems? Winter is almost here and I have an entire village to feed!"

Hiccup lowered his voice slightly and bobbed forward while giving a slight shrug. "Eh, between you and me, the village could do with a little less feeding, don't you think?"

Astrid coughed to suppress a laugh. It was a bit funny, but the

most humourous part was the horrified reactions of the Berkians, who patted their stomachs and looked at each other as if to ask that the obvious affront be contradicted.

"This isn't a joke, Hiccup!" Stoick snapped. "Why can't you follow the simplest orders?"

Gobber walked up behind the boy.

"I-I can't stop myself! I see a dragon and I have to just..." Hiccup mimed screwing a large object and then pushed his hands across his chest, as if breaking something. "Kill it." He raised his arms weakly. "It's who I am, Dad."

Stoick groaned and put his head in his hand. "You are many things, Hiccup. But a dragon killer is not one of them." He shook his head. "Get back to the house." He looked at Gobber. "Make sure he gets there." As the older blacksmith smacked the apprentice in the back of the head, Stoick continued, "I have his mess to clean up."

Hiccup approached the group of teens and kept his head down.

Ruffnut started laughing as Tuffnut sneered, "Quite the performance."

"I have never seen anyone mess up that badly," Snotlout remarked. He gestured to the village. "That helped!"

"Yes, thank you," Hiccup called sarcastically as he passed the boulder Astrid sat on. "I was trying."

Astrid looked down at her axe and stood up. The whole situation was a bit sad, but Hiccup needed to learn. They all had places they needed to be, and his was not fighting dragons. It was in the forge, where he could use his skills to sharpen blades.

She did not want to think about it anymore.

Her family would be headed back to the house for a morning meal before starting to help repair the town. She should get home and help her mother with the cooking, return the axe, maybe ask for permission to go train later...

"Anyway, Astrid, I was thinking that all of us should go train in the woods later," Snotlout said. "Or maybe just you and I couldâ€"

"Everyone training together sounds great," Astrid said. "After midday?" She looked at Ruffnut who shrugged. "Great."

She looked out at the village and sighed before jumping off the rock and heading home, making her way around charred remains. "Just great."

**\*\*I got very lazy at the end there...\*\***

**\*\*Now, I know that in the original one-shot I explained a bit of why I had written it, but not the entire motivation behind why I had chosen Astrid's point of view. See, I admire her. I really do. I can easily empathize with her, but because the film is so**

Hiccup-Toothless focused, we do not see very much of her side of things. I don't think she is nearly as fleshed out as she could be, and that makes her change of mind about Hiccup seem...abrupt to some. Almost unbelievable. Like the typical bitchy girl's "Oh, the nerd is cool now so I'm going to pay attention to him." Or just the typical love-interest, and nothing more. It really did not do her justice, and I think the creators could have played with her so much more (I hope they do in the next films, and that they get a bit deeper into her character in the show). So, I used my limited theatre major skills to get into her mind, work out her character and her motivations and see how on earth she could have gone from her previous attitude about Hiccup to the one she had at the end of the film. And I think I did a decent job. Maybe not the best, but decent. But I was not by any means finished with her. Because if there's one thing theatre and character work has taught me, its that you can ALWAYS go deeper. Every person has a history, even if you have to make it up. Every character has a home, a life, even if it's not portrayed, its important. And just because it's not portrayed does not make the **\*\*\_\*\*character\*\*\_\*\*** any less important. And it's actually just fine that she's not as developed as I would like, because she still asserts her own agency; plus, I get to mess with her and find out what that agency is. So I decided that I had to give her a voice and a life and a mind, because my inner actress was being annoying. And now I'm giving her a history. And now I'm rambling...\*

**\*\*All that to say, since I'm planning to really get deep into her character, the Romantic Flight scene may change just a bit to include more thought. This Time, For Sure will continue to stay up as is, though.\*\***

**\*\*I've basically got every scene for this already written...in my head. The trick will be getting it to a text document as a cohesive piece. Plus, I have other projects and school stuff that I'm working on, so this is not exactly at the top of my priority list. I make no promises about finish dates, just that there will be one.\*\***

**\*\*Who else is psyched for "Vikings" this Sunday? History Channel. New series on the Vikings. Be there.\*\***

**\*\*Again, just this once, I am asking for reviews as a belated birthday gift. Never again. I will never ask for reviews again.\*\***

## 2. Chapter 2

**\*\*Hello, again. I thought I'd never finish this. As usual, the hardest part was just wrapping it up. I actually skipped anthropology today for the sake of finishing this. In more exact terms, I skipped anthropology so I could watch Vikings and Game of Thrones. That way I would not be watching them later when I could be working on this. Priorities.\*\***

**\*\*As I mentioned before, I'm putting in my own version of the deleted scene between Hiccup and Astrid, "Axe to Grind." If you've not seen it, I suggest you do, because it adds a whole different layer to this chapter. \*\***

Chapter 2:

Grimefoot took a bite of his apple and said around a full mouth, "Ish not shentered."

Astrid glared at him over her shoulder and squinted against the noon sun. "Do it yourself, then."

He swallowed and held up the half-eaten fruit. "Busy."

"Clearly." She looked back at the log sitting on the stump. True, it was off center, but she had impeccable aim with an axe. And Grimefoot was just being difficult. "Thank you, by the way, for all your help," she said sarcastically.

"Not at all." She heard Grimefoot bite into the apple again before he continued, "Alwaysh a pleashure."

"I just love having a brother who actually does his share."

"Indeed. Encouraging you while you do all the work is a job for two people. It takes skill to be able to do it as one."

"Hm." She brought her mother's battle axe over her head and swung it downward. The small log split perfectly and the axe stuck in the stump. She let go of the handle and tossed the two halves of wood to the side. "It's funny, though. I seem to remember Mom saying something about you cutting and me handing you new logs."

"Lesh talking."

Something slammed into the small of her back and Astrid yelped before turning around. "Grimefoot!"

Her brother blinked. "I mished!"

She bent down and picked up the log with which he had nailed her. "You \_'mished'\_?"

He swallowed and threw the apple core to the side. "I swear! I missed." He grinned. "I was aiming higher."

Astrid raised the log above her head and ran toward him, but he simply laughed and ducked out of her way.

"Are you seriously trying to..."

She slung the log at him and he pushed her head to the side, knocking her off balance.

"I am twice your size..."

Astrid regained her footing and ran toward him, and Grimefoot grabbed her arm and twisted it behind her back. She dropped the log and struggled to get out of his hold, but he reached around with his other hand and dug his fingers into a certain spot just under her ribs. She shrieked and her knees buckled.

"I can take you down easy, you little dwarf," he said as he continued to tickle her.

"Don't...call me..." she gasped between hysterical guffaws. She writhed in his grasp.

Grimefoot moved his hand closer to her middle, toward the small little triangle where her ribs separated just above her navel and dug his fingers in. As she cried out and doubled over, he mused, "What on earth will you do if you walk into the ring and a dragon figures out this little weakness?"

Laughter racked her body, and she could barely breathe. She felt tears prickling behind her eyes.

"Grimefoot!" her mother's voice called from the house. "Stop torturing your poor sister."

The boy released her and Astrid took a deep breath as the last few giggles left her throat.

"And come inside," Gundy Hofferson added. "Your father's back. And he's brought the whole clan."

Astrid turned to look at her mother, standing in the wooden doorway with hands on her hips and a slight smile on her face. Like every other Hofferson, she had blue eyes and blonde hair, though hers was slightly darker and streaked with grey, unlike that of the younger generation. Astrid had definitely inherited Gundy's leaner, shorter build, while all four of the boys had taken after their father. Gundy jerked her head toward the inside of the house before disappearing through the door.

Grimefoot pushed Astrid forward. "But, I'm curious, what will you do if you get into the arena and a dragon discovers your weakness?"

Astrid rolled her eyes. "No dragon is going to attempt to tickle me."

He clicked his tongue. "You sound so sure. When I fought my Monstrous Nightmare, itâ€œ"

"If I can remember, that thing barely had time to blink. You took it down in seconds. It was a family record."

"It was a Berk record," Grimefoot corrected sounding very miffed before he continued cheerfully, "Datter and Dad were so upset. They had wanted more excitement."

She walked toward the doorway and stepped over the high threshold and immediately met with the familiar sight of far too many people in the small main room. Her eldest brother, Datter, made wild hand gestures as he spoke animatedly to her father, Boffer, who laughed as he leaned against the hearth. Were it not for the braids Datter wore in his yellow beard and the wrinkles lining her father's face, the two men would have been almost identical. Datter's brown-haired wife, Kata, sat at the table and was bouncing the new baby girl on her hip and snapping her fingers at her two-year-old son in the corner and begging him to "please, stop eating the grain raw, Daner." Cloutbeard's own blonde wife, Waspnest sat at the table as well and rested a hand on her bulging stomach as she tried to get Kata's attention to tell her some of the latest gossip. Cloutbeard himself

sat next to her and across the table from Splinter, with whom he was arm-wrestling. Splinter was winning, and Cloutbeard's face was twisted up in concentration and determination. Splinter's betrothed, Alga, cheered him on while she brushed her yellow hair out of her eyes.

Grimefoot pushed past her and walked right up to the dueling men, and before anyone could react to his presence, grabbed the linked hands and slammed them onto the wooden table. Splinter pumped his fists in the air in victory while Alga cackled and Cloutbeard leapt to his feet and screamed Grimefoot's name before punching him squarely in the jaw. Grimefoot reeled back and stepped forward to regain his balance, but Cloutbeard jumped forward and tackled him, sending them both to the floor.

Astrid's mother walked up to her daughter and brushed at her braid. "You've got chips in your hair."

"Thanks," Astrid replied before turning her attention to the wrestling match.

Alga shouted random encouragements as the two men grappled. Kata lost interest in her children and leaned over the table to get a better view of the fight, and even Waspnest for once dropped the latest news of what Racket Hoarkson had said about something positively scandalous in favour of the action. Boffer absolutely beamed at his boys and egged them on, telling them to go at it just as he had taught them. Datter grinned and made a jab at Cloutbeard, who made the mistake of turning his attention from Grimefoot in order to throw back a snide remark. Grimefoot took advantage of the situation and rolled them over so that he was on top of his older brother. He pulled back his fist and let it fly, punching Splinter on his cheek.

"Alright!" Boffer called above the din. "That's enough. Before we take down the house!"

"We couldn't take down the house, Boffer," Gundy said with a laugh.

"That a challenge, Mom?" Datter asked.

Boffer shook his head. "Seriously. We have news for those of you who weren't at the meeting."

Grimefoot stood up and held out a hand for Splinter. The older boy accepted it and the younger brother helped him to his feet. "That was a good hit," Grimefoot said. "I'll be feeling that one for a while. Might even bruise."

Splinter shrugged. "You too. That almost hurt."

The family laughed and Boffer held up his hands. "Really! We have things to discuss."

The small crowd quieted as the men sat next to their wives and the head of the family took his place at the head of the table.

Astrid leaned against the wooden wall and crossed her arms over her chest. The news from the meeting probably had nothing to do with her.

It never did.

"We're setting out for Helheim's gate. Tonight."

"Tonight?" Gundy asked. "How will you sail?"

Boffer shrugged. "Stoick has this idea that we should set out at night and follow the dragon flight patterns."

Everyone around the table nodded. It was logical. Dragons hunted at night. They returned to their nest at night.

"So we should get ready?" Grimefoot asked.

"Not you," Boffer said. "Someone's got to stay with Astrid. Your mother's coming with us."

"I can come help around the house," Kata assured Grimefoot. "Give you some time off. When I'm not preoccupied with the..." She looked down at the tiny girl in her lap and then looked over at the food corner and snapped her fingers. "Daner! Stop eating that!"

"Maybe Waspnest can stay at our house," Datter suggested.

"Oh, I'm fine," Kata said quickly. "Really, I don't need any help. I can manage."

"No one said you couldn't," Datter pointed out.

Gundy nodded. "Waspnest will be the one in need of assistance, with the baby due at any time."

Waspnest reached out and grabbed Kata's hand. "We'll have so much fun. We can talk \_all night\_."

Kata gave the other woman a very forced smile before she elbowed her own husband in the side. Datter winced.

"So...I'm staying," Grimefoot clarified. "Why does anyone need to be here for Astrid? She can handle herself."

Astrid smiled.

Cloutbeard waved a hand in his direction. "In case she gets hurt, or something."

Grimefoot snorted. "Hurt? Butâ€" "

"He's not finished," Datter said.

Boffer nodded. "We're pulling men from the defenses to man the ships, so they're going to start training new recruits."

Astrid could hear her heart rate accelerating. Finally.

"She's starting training in the morning."

Everyone looked at her with wide, expectant smiles.

Astrid struggled to find her breath. Finally. Finally!

"Ready to take up the family legacy?" Splinter asked.

Astrid nodded. "Absolutely." Every person in that room, with the exception of herself and the children, obviously, had been chosen his or her year to slay the Monstrous Nightmare. Every person in that room had done it, and every battle had become legend. Her father had taken down the biggest one ever captured. Datter had killed the hottest Nightmare known. Waspnest had killed hers with three quick shots with a bow. Grimefoot had set a record for the fastest kill in history.

She was ready to make her own mark.

It was her birthright.

Gundy held out her prized battle axe and held it out. "You'll need this."

Astrid reached and closed her fingers around the handle. She had practiced with it hundreds of times, and its feel was so familiar. It would help her through the ring. It would help her attain her destiny.

"Well, go on, then!" Grimefoot said. "Go get it sharpened."

Astrid nodded once and turned and pushed the door open and smiled broadly. One more night and she would be doing what she had trained for her entire life. Two weeks and she would make her own legend in the ring. She stepped outside and took a deep breath.

Finally.

She closed the door right as Kata cried, "Daner, I told you to stop eating raw grain!"

\* \* \*

><p>Astrid walked up to the building and heard Gobber's voice over the clanging and banging. "...makes grown men  
<em>uncomfortable<em>."

She kept walking and had almost reached the doorway. She could easily see Gobber and Hiccup conversing over an anvil with a glowing sword resting atop it.

"Speaking of 'uncomfortable,'" Hiccup replied in that sarcastic, nasal mumble, "I'd like a new conversation, please."

She placed a hand on the wooden frame of the door and opened her mouth to say something to get their attention.

"Alright," Gobber shrugged before he looked at Hiccup while wagging his eyebrows in a suggestive manner. "How's it goin' with the ladies?"

Astrid closed her mouth quickly and looked away. She should not be listening...

Hiccup rolled his eyes. "Oh, yeah. Way to get the mood back on



track..."

She should not be listening. Private conversations and all that. She did not care, of course, but the topic made her feel exceedingly uncomfortable.

She decided she could come back later.

With a quick turn before Gobber could reply in his thick drawl, she walked away.

Never before had she...She had never really thought that Hiccup was like other boys, thinking about girls and all that. In a sense, it was weird, thinking about Hiccup as a normal boy, as a normal person who thought about normal things. He had always just been this complete screw-up, existing purely for the purpose of making life more difficult. He had always been this kid that she had once known. That he even looked at girls...The thought had never even crossed her mind.

And why should it? She did not particularly care what Hiccup did or thought. In all actuality, she had merely felt awkward eavesdropping on such a personal conversation.

She frowned as she realized just how little she knew about him. Even if it did not affect her, she should know something about Stoick's son beyond his amazing propensity for trouble.

She looked up and took a step back when she saw Snotlout walking toward her with determination.

Never mind personal conversations. She looked down at the axe in her hand and turned on her heel and headed back toward the forge. That axe needed to be sharpened as soon as possible.

Snotlout would never walk into the forge. He did not associate with Hiccup if he could help it. He did not want all the Hiccup-ness rubbing off on him.

Extending a hand of friendship and talking to Hiccup suddenly seemed like less trouble. It was definitely worth her time.

"Astrid!" Snotlout called.

Oh, gods...She picked up her pace as casually as she could. She had not heard him.

"...wouldn't come near me if she was on fire and I had the only bucket of water in town," Hiccup said as she walked up to the door.

"Hey!" she said a little too loudly, too forcefully, too desperately.

Gobber looked up with mild interest before he cracked a sly grin. Hiccup looked at her with wide eyes and pressed his lips together. He looked as if he had been caught stealing honey from her mother's special stash.

She said a little softer, "Can I get this sharpened?"

Hiccup, still looking sheepish, scared, and oddly guilty, wiped at the corner of his mouth and flashed a very wide, very crooked smile. "Astrid!" he said a bit too brightly before he continued his nasal, mumbling, prattle. "Hi, Astrid! Hello, there. Welcome..."

She rolled her eyes and spun the axe in her hand. She welcomed the useless babble as an excuse to avoid Snotlout, but she did not have \_all\_ day.

"What can I do?"

She threw the axe at a wooden block and the blade stuck firmly.

Hiccup jumped slightly and looked at the axe. "Hey..." he said, holding out the sound with a slight tremor in his voice and sounding not very unlike a frightened sheep.

Astrid stalked into the shop and stood next to the wooden block.

With that same sly look in his eyes, Gobber grinned and lifted his hammer prosthetic behind Hiccup's back. "Uh, my, uh..." He used the hammer to push Hiccup forward, and the boy stumbled before coming to a stop directly in front of Astrid. He straightened and looked at her with wide eyes.

Green.

His eyes were green.

Not that it particularly \_mattered\_. His eyes would never have an impact on her life.

"...\_manly\_ apprentice here will service all of your needs," Gobber continued.

Hiccup's eyelids lowered slightly and turned around to give Gobber a lidded, sardonic glare.

A silent message seemed to pass between the two males, and Gobber looked to his right with a look of slight panic that suggested he knew he was in some sort of trouble. "I have to..." Gobber picked up a handful of nails from a barrel. "...go..." He sidestepped into the barrel and held out the hand full of nails to steady it. He dropped the nails into the barrel. "...get..." He stepped back and trailed his hand along the edge of the barrel. "...some..." He leaned forward and pointed with his hammer at Astrid and Hiccup. "...juh..."

Astrid raised an eyebrow. She had always known Gobber was a bit loose in the head, but this was unexpectedly ridiculous.

Gobber stepped to his right again and pointed a finger at them before mumbling, "I'm just going outside," and shuffling out the back door, chuckling as he went.

Hiccup turned to look back at Astrid and gave her a short laugh. He gestured in the direction the blacksmith had just gone. "Gobber." He flashed that crooked smile.

Astrid narrowed her eyes as she pulled the axe out of the wooden block. The smithy was probably the strangest place she had ever been.

Hiccup held out his arms for the axe, and she pulled it back from him. Given Hiccup's performance that morning, she was not sure she trusted him with anything sharp.

His smile fell and he stared at her with wide, innocent eyes.

Where was the harm, though? She was already planning to stay in order to avoid Snotlout. She could keep Hiccup from doing anything stupid. She held out the axe again and he reached out to grab the handle. She released her grip and he groaned as he struggled under the weight of the weapon before it pulled him down and the axe head slammed against the ground.

Astrid rolled her eyes again. Manly, indeed.

Hiccup looked up from his hunched over position. "Ok!" He sighed and started pulling the axe toward a grindstone sitting near the furnace. "Razor sharp battle axe, coming right up."

Astrid winced as the iron head scraped along the ground. "Careful! That's my mother's." She turned and saw an interesting display of swords hanging on a wooden wall and she walked toward them.

"So...I, uh, saw you guys on fire patrol this morning," Hiccup began conversationally.

Astrid reached out and ran her hand over the hilt of one of the swords. The pommel at the end was simple fan topped with a round disc. No fancy inlays. Practical.

"Looked like a good time," Hiccup added pointedly.

Astrid closed her hand around the hilt of the sword. The poor kid was starved for conversation. She could not blame him: with only Gobber for company and any other human interaction resulting in continual put-downs, Hiccup was probably going insane. She had decided to extend the hand of friendship, and extend it she would. Though, she had known everyone in the village since she was born. She had been spending time with the other kids for years. It had been so long since she had met someone and been forced to make a friend that she had forgotten how.

But how hard could it possibly be? Maybe if she spoke to him as if he were one of the other kids their age...She could just speak to him as if he were Ruffnut. That was easy.

"Yeah, I didn't get burned, though," she replied. She lifted the sword from its hook on the wall. It was balanced enough, not perfect, but it was extremely heavy. She tossed the sword to her other hand and spun the blade. It was made for someone stronger, someone who fought with momentum, someone who valued force over precision. "It's only fun if you get a scar out of it," she said, quoting her eldest bother, Datter. She had never actually received a scar from fire patrol, but Hiccup did not need to know that.

"Yeah, no kidding, right?" Hiccup said, though his voice lacked enthusiasm and sincerity. It was not sarcastic, but strangely forced, as if he were trying to adapt to the topic but could not relate. "Pain...Love it."

Astrid bit her lip as she pretended to examine the sword. She was trying, he was trying...They were both forcing the conversation, and it was beyond awkward.

Hiccup grunted and then released a huge gasp of air as the grindstone started turning, the wheel squeaking in the wooden support. Was he too weak to even turn the stone? No, the wheel had to have been stuck. Astrid decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. That was what one did when making friends, right?

"Yeah, I would have been there, too," Hiccup continued, his voice strained as he exerted effort into the task of turning the grindstone. "But I was out, downing a Night Fury..." He gasped for air.

Astrid put the sword back in its place and reached for a higher one that caught her eye. How long was Hiccup going to drag this tale out? Usually he would stop pretending after one word from Stoick, but if he was still talking about it several hours later...

Did one humour others when trying to make friends?

Astrid decided she would. "Really?" she asked with feigned interest. She jumped slightly when she heard the iron head of her mother's axe slam against the grindstone. "Well, where...Where isâ€œ"

"Ah, uh...I-it got away," Hiccup said quickly with a twinge of disappointment in his voice. "Um..."

Astrid plucked the sword off the wall. This one was so different. The hilt was lovely, with the angled pommel and delicately curved crossguard were decorated with little designs laid with copper. The tang was narrow and long, allowing for maneuverability and quick changes in hand position.

"But it won't be back anytime soon," Hiccup said with a false sort of confidence, as if he were trying to show off. "Believe you me." He laughed quietly.

Astrid held up the sword and peered down the blade. The distal taper was almost perfect, placing the balance beautifully and comfortably close to the grip, and the end of the blade narrowed into a rounded point. This was a sword for delicate maneuvers, for dances between opponents. It would be a useless blade during a dragon battle, but it would be perfect for raids against the well-armed and well-trained Anglo-Saxons.

She was suddenly overcome with the unusual feeling of being watched, though it was not that creepy, annoying feeling she got when she knew Snotlout was following her. It was a curious sensation, one of interest, as if someone were merely observing her actions and waiting to see what she would do next. She turned around, but Hiccup was bent over the grindstone, focused on the axe. She shrugged and turned back toward the wall and put the sword back in its place. She spotted another similar blade higher up and reached for the hilt.

"Yeah, you know," Hiccup said casually, "this apprentice thing is just my sort of, on the side, uh..."

She felt those eyes on her again, and a nagging thought that maybe the gaze was not so innocent that time pulled at her mind, but she brushed it off. She could hear the grindstone whirring, indicating that Hiccup was still working, and she knew there was no one else in the smithy. She was just imagining things.

Her fingers grazed the pommel of the sword, but it was too far out of her grasp. Still, the craftsmanship was beautiful. She could not imagine Gobber creating anything so delicate and fine.

"I'm mostly here to bulk up, with some iron and stuff...Become one with the steel!" There was a loud scrape as Hiccup let out a sudden yelp. The sound of the axe against the grindstone stopped.

Had he hurt himself? Idiot.

Astrid turned away from the wall and noticed a barrel of swords in a corner next to a curtain. She walked over to the barrel and picked up one of the swords by the hilt. The blade was unsharpened and beaten badly and had a huge dent in the middle. These swords needed repairing. She dropped the weapon and it rattled into the barrel with the others. She then grabbed the curtain.

"Ah!" "dah!" "no!" Hiccup cried. "You're not actually supposed to!" "uh..."

She pulled aside the curtain to reveal a small room with an angled writing desk pushed against the wall next to the doorway and a small set of shelves on the adjacent wall. Every inch of the room was blanketed in parchment covered in lines and drawings made in charcoal.

"What...is all of this?"

She heard footsteps scuttle behind her before Hiccup eloquently blurted, "Uh...oh...uh, those? Nothing..."

Astrid rolled her eyes and stepped into the small room and leaned forward to get a closer look at one sketch. The parchment was not tacked to the wall but was held up due to the fact that the page was wedged under a splinter of wood. Carefully she pulled the parchment out and held it up. It looked like a crossbow, an Anglo-Saxon weapon, but she could not be sure. It was drawn at several angles, each one showing a different component. After a moment she concluded that it held at least fifteen arrows at once, that they would automatically click into place, and that a person could load another arrow while one was being fired. It was clever, she decided. Very clever. There were messy notes scrawled around the diagrams with arrows pointing to certain parts. Notes like "clogging" and "draw-back efficiency" and things she could not decipher.

"Just some stuff I'm working on..."

She tried to wedge the page back under the splinter, but the parchment crumpled and tore a bit. Astrid winced and tried again, gently. When she finally got it to stay, she turned around and almost

ran into the writing desk.

Juh-just, uh..." There was a loud chorus of clattering and clanging. "...Confidential..." Hiccup groaned loudly and Astrid wondered for a moment what in Midgard was happening out there. "...Upper level development."

She leaned over the desk, her fascination caught by yet another sketch, this one of a long sort of wheel-barrow. Or it would have been a wheelbarrow were it not for two very long strips jutting from either side like oars or wings. More scratchy notes said things like "canvas or leather" and "two levels with support" and "tapered edges." A smaller piece of parchment was tacked to the bottom corner with a nail. That parchment displayed a detailed diagram of a bird in flight with arrows pushing up and down against the feathered wings. "Maybe like wind pushes a sail," one note said. She fought the urge to scoff. It was as if he were implying that wind blew up and down at the same time, that air weighed something, and that was why birds could fly. It was a stupid theory.

"I-I can't really...talk about it, so..."

She could understand why. If the bird thing was any indication, his ideas were weird and dumb. She looked down and saw a leather bound book sitting on a stack of parchment on the desk. She picked up the book and examined the cover. She had seen it before. Hiccup always had it with him. Snotlout had always theorized that Hiccup had been writing poetry like the "pansy" he was. Astrid had never really cared. If Hiccup wanted to write in his book, he could write in his book. At that moment, however, the book was a source of great curiosity. Maybe it held more of his weird and dumb ideas. She brushed her left hand over the cover and almost opened it, but something caught her eye. It was the page on the top of the stack that had been sitting under the book. She dropped the little book and picked up the parchment instead. The charcoal sketch looked something like a small four-armed catapult with little dotted lines leading to some teathed triangles. At the bottom was written a word in huge letters.

"'The Mutilator'..." she read aloud. It sounded cool, unlike everything else in the tiny room.

"Yes, yes...uh..." Hiccup sighed heavily. "Basically it used twin-weighted counter-levers to launch crisscrossing blades in four different directions," he clarified in a bored, hopeless voice, as if he had completely given up on the project and found it incredibly dull and simplistic.

Twin-weighted-what-now? Astrid had barely understood the explanation, which annoyed her enough. And Hiccup's weary tone did not help. "How do you hold it?"

"Well, you don't," he replied as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "You shoot it." Something started squeaking outside the room.

"Oh." Astrid raised one eyebrow and dropped the page on top of the book. He may not have meant to offend, but she did not like his tone or the conversation. It was as if he were trying to make her feel stupid by using big words and displaying these nonsensical drawings.

And she was not stupid. She was definitely smart, smarter than any other kid her age, with the exception of Fishlegs...maybe. She had always been smarter. It was what gave her the edge, what made her better in a battle. She could think on her feet better than anyone else her age. It was why she was often put in charge. It was why she was respected by her peers. And Hiccup was not smarter than she was. He simply could not be. "Eh, well..." she said in the most disparaging voice she could muster. She noticed a...thing leaning against the desk and she picked it up. It was strange object, like a stick with an adjacent handle with a ball on the end. "I'm more of an old-fashioned take it down with an axe and then lop its head off kind of girl," she said, punctuating her sentence by flicking the ball. It spun forward and back with a satisfying boing. She set it down hard. "It's kinda the Viking way, right?" she added, intentionally bringing up something she knew he could not relate to. In all things Viking, she was unquestionably his superior.

"Go Vikings," he said dryly.

She grinned as her mind trailed to the wonderful news she had heard earlier that day. She strolled out of the room. Hiccup was still bent over the grindstone, and she wondered for a moment what all the noise was about. But it meant nothing in the light of the news. "Gosh, I can't wait to get started tomorrow! We finally get a chance to show them what we've got! I am so excited!" She walked past him toward the exit and saw that Snotlout was still hanging around the square, though he was now accompanied by Fishlegs and the twins. Right. She had made a commitment.

"Ye-yeah!" The grinding stopped and Hiccup grunted before continuing uncertainly, "I-I am so excited...for...you..."

She turned around and looked at him. Hiccup looked back at her and held her mother's axe in both of his hands. "What, you didn't hear?" she asked. Of all people, he would know. He was the chief's son.

Hiccup shrugged.

Maybe he had not seen his father since the fiasco that morning. Maybe he did not know yet. But if he had not been home, where had he been the whole day? She narrowed her eyes. "They're pulling men to crew the ships," she offered as an explanation.

Hiccup nodded. "And you're happy because you..." He gestured to her with one hand and raised an eyebrow. "...like to wave goodbye?"

He did not know. She knew something he did not know. It felt like such sweet justice for earlier, when he had rubbed those weird terms in her face. She picked up a dagger lying on a nearby crate and flicked the point. "No, stupid," she said, driving the word as much as she could without being obnoxious. "They need replacements to defend the town." She walked up to him and grabbed his shoulders as excitement overtook her desire to...do whatever she was doing. Because she certainly did not have anything to prove. "We start training in the morning! We'll be fighting dragons!" She grinned and looked into his big eyes.

Green eyes. How had she forgotten what colour his eyes were? She suddenly realized that she was taller than he was, and she had to

look down to see those big, green eyes. And he had so many freckles, more than she had. She had never noticed.

She felt awful, like she had been negligent in a duty. Like she had cruelly abandoned someone. It was a stupid feeling.

She wondered what girl Hiccup and Gobber had been talking about before she walked in. She and Ruffnut were the only girls his age, but neither of them ever spoke to him, so it did not seem likely that either girl had been the subject. Maybe a girl a year or two older? Like Racket Abbisson or Rasp Hraniman? Hiccup often went to visit other tribes and take part in Things. Maybe a girl from another village? Maybeâ€

"Astrid!" Snotlout shouted, yanking her from her thoughts. "You coming to practice with us or what?"

She quickly stepped back and removed her hands from Hiccup's shoulders. After a moment, she held out her left hand.

Hiccup took a deep breath and grunted as he hefted the axe in both his hands and she grabbed it from him and opened her mouth to thank him then closed it again.

Odd. She passed the axe to her right hand and waved it up and down. It felt...strange. She passed it back to her left hand. "This feels different," she stated as she held it up to examine it. It looked fine. She could not quite put her finger on it, but something...

"Oh!" Hiccup said quickly. He sounded almost panicked, as if he knew he had done something wrong. "Yeah! I rebalanced it. Tightened it up," he continued casually as he mimed tightening something. "Uh...Finessed it." He held out his arms as if making a presentation. "We're a full-service outfit here." He pointed at her and smiled that crooked grin.

"Huh." That was it. The balance was better. Right around the head, allowing for more control. She had not asked him to do it, but it was a nice gesture. Why was he so nervous about it? She was not going to yell at him for improving a weapon that desperately needed it. She looked at him and opened her mouth to thank him again but stopped.

Gods, his eyes were green. Green like leaves in summer. She had no idea eyes could ever be that green.

Not that it particularly \_mattered.\_

Hiccup had rebalanced her axe without her asking. He did not have to, even if Gobber's stall was a "full-service outfit." It was sweet. Maybe she had misjudged him. He was certainly weird, but maybe he had not meant to insult her earlier. Maybe he had been giving her credit for being intelligent. Maybe he had taken for granted that she would understand. Maybe it was a compliment. Maybe he just needed someone intelligent to talk to. She was familiar with the feeling.

She tore her gaze away from those big green eyes and reached into the pouch at her hip for a spare coin or something to trade. She bit her lip as she realized that she had nothing of value.



"Ah..."

She looked up and met those big green eyes again.

Hiccup shook his head with a soft smile and waved a hand.

"Thanks." Feeling a bit embarrassed by her horrible blunder, she pushed her bangs back behind her ear.

"Sure." He smiled that crooked grin and she found that she wanted to smile back.

So she did. For a second she considered inviting him along. He could escape the forge for once, and maybe make a few much-needed friends.

"Astrid!" Ruffnut called.

Hiccup pressed his lips together and looked at her expectantly, waiting for her next move.

He would probably turn down the invitation, anyway. He was awkward like that.

With one last smile, she turned and jogged out of the shop. She slowed to a walk when she reached the group of kids.

Tuffnut grinned and put his hands behind his head. "Oh, I hope I get some serious scars out of this!" He did not say, but his excitement betrayed that he knew as well: they were all headed to dragon training in the morning.

"Oh, I know!" Astrid agreed with equal enthusiasm. "Like a jagged one right across your cheek!"

"Or right through my eye!"

She smiled and turned back around. Maybe she should invite Hiccup along, even if he were certain to turn down the offer. It was just the nice thing to do. But the boy had already disappeared back into the shop.

"What?" Snotlout asked.

Astrid shook her head and turned back and continued walking.  
"Nothing."

"What was going on back there?" he asked forcefully.

She raised an eyebrow. Snotlout could not think that...No. "Hiccup was sharpening this axe." She held the weapon up as some sort of proof. "We were just talking."

"T-talking?" Snotlout sputtered. "But...he's so weird!"

"Yeah," Astrid agreed with a nod. "Yeah, he really is."

Snotlout smiled, seemingly satisfied with her answer, and went on, "Like, super weird. Did I ever tell you? This one time,

he..."

Astrid looked at the axe and spun it in her hand. Hiccup was definitely weird. He was probably the weirdest person with whom she had ever spoken. But he was nice. Nicer than his cousin, and probably ten times as smart.

And maybe, just maybe, he would be a good friend. A strange friend, but a good one.

**\*\*And there you have it. The first chapter of the sequel story is up, if you're interested. It's entitled \*\*Here Be Dragons\*\*. So check it out if you're willing.\*\***

**\*\*I'm very amazed that my roommate is still sleeping as I type this...On my way from the door to my bed and computer, I'm fairly certain I successfully managed to step on every noisy object in the dark dorm room. A plastic bag full of plastic Easter eggs, a couple of plastic bags of candy, a box of something like candies or mints...I also face-planted at one point and slammed into the floor with all the force of a falling giant. All of this within fifteen steps. I think I deserve some sort of award for being so incredibly uncoordinated.\*\***

**\*\*Also, I'm looking for a Beta for this one and \*\*Here\*\*Be\*\*Dragons\*\*, so if anyone out there is interested in either or both, shoot me a PM. \*\***

**\*\*And, for anyone still reading this author's note, I want you to know that you're awesome. And beautiful/handsome/whatever-you-prefer. Someone just stopped me on our quad today and told me that, and it got me thinking...We don't give compliments nearly enough. We love to get them, but we don't give them as much. And I was thinking, the world would be a much happier place if we'd all take the time to tell our friends and families and even random strangers just how fucking cool they are.\*\***

**\*\*In case anyone was interested, I wrote this whole chapter while listening to Abney Park's newest album, \*\*Ancient World\*\*. So relatable to the chapter content, I know.\*\***

**\*\*Leave a review if it suits your fancy. Don't if it doesn't. I'm not big on demanding them. They don't feel earned that way, you know?\*\***

**\*\*Happy Belated Easter and Return of \*\*Doctor\*\*Who\*\* and \*\*Game of Thrones\*\*!\*\***

### 3. Chapter 3

**\*\*So, I got on a plane to go to Portugal (reason I have not updated in forever...you don't really get WiFi in the middle of an archaeology dig in rural \*\*anywhere\*\*), and I had been having a pretty bad day. I had somehow lost something of minor importance on the first flight leg, I had eaten nothing but horrible airplane food, and I was exhausted. So not that bad, but you have to understand that when I lose something or forget to do something, I go \*\*insane\*\*. I can't process anything until I have fixed the problem, and if I can't fix the problem, I feel like I have**

completely let myself and everyone around me down. I just have a thing about responsibility and completing my responsibilities. Anyway, bad day, and I get on the plane to Libson. I'm in the exit row (heck yeah, extra leg-room), and I get myself situated, and I just start praying that a totally awesome movie would be one of the options on demand. And not just any movie...**\*\*\_\*\*How\*\*\_\*\*to\*\*\_\*\*Train\*\*\_\*\*Your\*\*\_\*\*Dragon\*\*\_\*\***. And I knew this was insanely unlikely, since airlines tend to only have newer movies and I had seen on the lovely cover of the magazine that the plane was featuring **\*\*\_\*\*Rise\*\*\_\*\*of\*\*\_\*\*the\*\*\_\*\*Guardians\*\*\_\*\***. So two DreamWorks movies was a high impossibility. But I prayed for that movie anyway, because nothing makes me feel better than my favourite animated feature, that masterpiece of cinematography and storytelling. And I turned on the television, touched the movies option, selected family movies...And it wasn't there. And that's my pointless story for the day.\*\*

**\*\*Just kidding. It was right smack dab in the middle of the screen. Just looking at it made my day infinitely better. And naturally I watched it. Twice. In a row. I have a problem. And you know what's funny about that? I really don't care. I own my issues.\*\***

### Chapter 3

She bit her lip and looked at her hands where they were gripping two branches. She glanced down at her feet and then back up.

She was too high. She could not think about that.

She looked up at him, sitting high above her head with all the ease of a perched bird or squirrel.

"Astrid?"

She groaned and opened her mouth to make the hardest admission of her life. "I'm scared."

He grinned down at her. "It's alright. Just don't look down."

"No, Hiccup." She swallowed hard. "I'm scared. I've never been this high before..." She refused to even sleep in the loft with her brothers because it was too high above the ground and she had to climb a ladder to get there. She slept on a pallet in her parents' room.

"Ok, just wait." Hiccup quickly shimmied down the trunk of the tree until he was right above her head. He held out a hand. "I'll help you."

"Hiccup, I want to get down," she said. Taking his hand would mean letting go of the tree branch, and letting go would probably mean falling to her death.

She refused to fall to her death.

"Astrid, justâ€"

"Hiccup! Get me down from here!" She closed her eyes and held tight to the branches.

"Astrid."

She opened her eyes when she felt his hand on hers. Instinctively, she gripped it. "I don't want to go any higher."

"Alright," he said. His voice was smooth and quiet, as if he were calming a small animal. "Just to the branch I'm on, then."

She glared up at him. "That's higher."

He smiled, all crooked mouth and gapped teeth. "I'm not going to let you fall. Trust me." He squeezed her hand tight. "Please, Astrid."

She took a deep breath and nodded. It had been her stupid idea, after all. She had asked him to show her how to climb a tree as he often did. He was skinny and small, but that made him quick and spry, and she was small too. If she could just bury her fear... "What do I do?"

He pointed down at a knot at her right knee. "Put your foot on that."

She glanced at the knot and then back at him. "I'll slip."

"You won't," he promised. "And if you do, I'll catch you." He grinned again.

She almost laughed. There was absolutely no way he could catch her. If she slipped, she'd pull him down too. But his words gave her a bit of courage, and she lifted her right foot and put it on the knot. "Now what?"

"Pull yourself up."

She used all of her strength to pull herself until she was balancing on the knot. He still held her hand, and she could see that he was sitting on a branch just to the side of the one she had been gripping. Slowly, she pulled herself up until she was hanging partly over the first branch. His was only a small jump away, but she would not jump. "What now?"

"Pull yourself onto that branch. That's it, put your feet on it. Stand and grab the trunk."

Rather than grabbing the trunk, she fell against it and embraced the tree as if it were her lifeline, which it was at the moment.

"Just step to your right..."

She closed her eyes and reached out a foot and breathed easy when her toes hit the wood. She hugged the trunk tight and moved her whole body to the side.

"Good! Now just sit. You're doing great."

She slowly lowered herself to sit on the branch as his words of encouragement washed over her. She did not let go of the trunk. When she was finally sitting, she said, "Now get me down."

Hiccup laughed. "You're not even \_looking\_."

"I don't want to look."

She felt his hand on her elbow and slowly let go of the tree to take his hand instead, though she kept one arm wrapped around the trunk.

"Open your eyes."

"No."

"You don't have to look around, just look at me." He squeezed her hand. "Trust me."

She turned her head toward his voice and opened one eye.

Hiccup grinned and his shoulders shook. He was laughing at her.

She opened the other eye and kept looking at him. She would not look down. She would never look down.

"See?" He smiled sweetly at her. "Nothing to be afraid of."

"Easy for you to say," she grumbled. He was perfectly at home high above the earth. She preferred the ground. Astrid looked down at his hand in hers and noticed that there were little red welts on his fingers and palm. She had no idea how he had climbed with his hands like that. "Do your hands hurt?"

He shrugged and started to pull his hand away, but she held fast. "Not really." He looked at his other hand, which had matching welts on it. "Gobber says they'll turn to blisters soon, that they'll hurt, but they'll eventually harden as I get used to the work."

She nodded. He had only been working in the forge for a few weeks. She missed the times they could just play together, but he was eight now, and she would be as well in a few months. It was time for both of them to grow up. "I never thought you'd be working with Gobber," she said.

He shrugged again. "My dad says I need to be useful." He winced.

"You're not useless." She had of course heard people say that, particularly when he got in the way during dragon raids, but she could not agree. Hiccup had a good imagination; it made him fun. And he was nice. Those were not useless things. "You're not useless," she said again. "You taught me how to climb a tree!" It was not a very chiefly thing, teaching people to climb trees, and when he headed the tribe he probably would not spend his time teaching the rest of the village, but at the moment, climbing a tree was the most amazing thing in the world. It was certainly the bravest thing she had ever done. And judging from the way Hiccup was grinning at her, those words meant more to him than anything else she could have said. His smile was bright, like a gap-toothed sun shining through a cloud of freckles, so bright she had to look away for a moment.

And then she saw. She saw everything. She saw the little clearing

where they played, dotted with little colours she knew were flowers; the dry creek bed that would be full in spring; far-off trees, black against the sky like quick, inky brush strokes; near-by trees with green tops where birds flitted and sang. It was beautiful.

"Oh," she said.

"Yeah," Hiccup said next to her.

A small butterfly darter around her head, as if taunting her, as if saying it had told her so. Which it had not. Hiccup had. And as she sat there, at the top of the world, looking at everything below, she realized she was not afraid anymore.

Well, maybe a little, but she would never admit that.

They sat there for hours, watching the clouds move and the birds fly and just talking about everything and nothing. Finally, they had climbed down, Hiccup going first and telling her where to put her feet.

"You're almost there," he said from the forest floor. His voice was close, and she knew he was telling the truth.

Astrid moved her hand down to another branch and her fingers slipped. She felt the horrible, sickening sensation of falling and waved her arms around as if desperately trying to fly.

"Astrid!"

She knew it. She was going to die. She never should have climbed the stupid tree orâ€

She landed with a thud on something soft, and the soft thing groaned. "Oh!" She had landed on Hiccup. "Sorry..." She scrambled off of him and pulled him to his feet.

"Thanks." He rubbed the back of his head and looked down at his shoes. Then he glanced up at her and smiled.

She smiled back.

"Dwarf!" she heard her brother call in the distance.

"My brother's going to teach me to throw an axe!" she said with excitement. "I'll teach you!"

"Oh..." Hiccup furrowed his brow. "Ok..."

She grinned and ran toward her brother. "Grimefoot! I'm coming!" She dashed through the trees and eventually found him wearing his usual grin.

Grimefoot winked at her and said, "Dwarf? What are you doing still asleep?"

Astrid forced her eyes open, though her lids felt as if they were stuck together with honey.

"Dwarf!"

"What?" she snapped back. What a funny dream to have. It was more of a memory, one she had not visited in years. It was shortly after that day that she had stopped hanging around Hiccup, that talent and society had driven them apart.

"Oh, you're up." Grimefoot's head popped up from the ladder leading to the loft. "You might want to eat something. And be quick. If you don't hurry, you won't be the first one there." He winked and climbed back down the ladder.

Astrid sat up sharply.

Dragon training.

She jumped out of bed and dressed quickly and slid down the ladder.

Grimfoot looked up at her. "That was fast."

She grabbed a piece of two-day-old bread from the table and picked up a small jar. Her mother had made a paste from honey and the first hazelnuts.

"You know, I was just kidding about that being first thing."

She dipped her fingers into the jar and smeared the paste on the bread before licking the remains off her hand.

"I mean, you don't have to be the first. It doesn't mean anything."

She ran out the door.

"Hey!" he called after her. "You forgot something!"

She skidded to a stop and turned around.

Grimefoot stood in the doorway holding her mother's axe. "Being first doesn't get you extra points."

She ran up to him and grabbed the axe, but he held onto it. "Grimefoot," she groaned.

"You haven't even washed your face."

She stomped back into the house, put the bread on the table, marched over to a small basin near the hearth, and splashed some water on her face.

"I try to be a good older brother. I try to get you to eat something. I try to get you to just take care of yourself..."

She straightened and grabbed the bread off the table before trying to take the axe from him again.

"Wait." He grabbed her and hugged her tight. Then he released her and dropped the axe in her arms. "Alright. Go make me proud," he said with a wink.

She nodded and bit down on her bread sweetened with hazelnuts and honey and started running for the Ring, smearing some of the khol she kept in her pouch around her eyes with her smallest finger as she did. The khol would help keep out some of the morning glare.

She had been there at least once every year, sometimes going every day for two weeks when it was someone she knew well. She had seen almost all of her family in the Ring; there were a few, obviously, for which she had not yet been born and a few others that were hazy in her mind because she had been too young to remember. But she definitely knew the way.

She ran past the docks, past the little platform that overlooked the ocean and the torches, and across the wooden bridge. The Ring had been cut into a large, stone pillar that was separate from the island.

She stepped off the bridge and onto the rock as she swallowed the last of the bread and hazelnut spread.

No one else had arrived, so she sat down at the gate and listened to Gobber whistling inside the Ring and watched up the carved passageway as the sun rose higher over the ocean. The light on the water sparkled like jewels, and she felt that nothing in the world could possibly ruin the promise and joy of the day.

"Astrid!"

Almost nothing.

She fought the urge to roll her eyes at him as he approached with his usual swagger. He held a morning star in his right hand and wore what he must have considered a very suave smirk across his face.

"Snotlout," she said shortly.

Snotlout rested his morning star on his shoulder. "You know, it's gonna be so great when I get to kill that Monstrous Nightmare..."

Then she did roll her eyes, because she knew that he stood absolutely no chance. Not while she had anything to say about it, at least. That dragon was hers.

"Oh! Hey! You guys are already here..." Fishlegs ran down to the gate and bobbed awkwardly on his heels. "I wonder what we'll be fighting first. My sister told me that on the first day they had a Nadder!"

"Did your sister ever tell you to shut up?" Snotlout asked.

Fishlegs looked hurt and closed his mouth. He gripped his large stone hammer in both hands

"...totally not!"

"Shut up, butt-mudge! You have no idea!"

"You really think?" "hey!"



Astrid stood up as the twins walked down the passage, each bearing a spear.

Ruffnut approached her. "He's being stupid again."

Astrid smiled. She and Ruffnut got along fine usually, though they did have the ability to rub each other the wrong way. "I could hit him for you," she said.

Tuffnut shook his head. "No hitting."

Everyone then went completely silent for a moment, all seeming to realize what they were about to do. They were all there. They were all ready.

Almost.

Astrid may have been the only one to notice Hiccup's absence, but it itched at her mind. Was he being kept out? Or was he just late?

And why did she care?

She cared because she had decided to try being his friend again.

The grate covering the doorway opened with a series of chains clanging and gears clanking.

Astrid turned around quickly as Gobber announced, "Welcome to Dragon Training!"

She gripped her axe in her right hand and took a deep breath. "No turning back." She stepped out of the tunnel and immediately had to squint her eyes against the bright sunlight. She looked to her left and to her right, and her eyes widened against the glare.

She was there. She was in the Ring. After years of hoping and waiting and training...Everything she had ever wanted was right there.

She started to brush back her bangs, and, realizing that she had resorted to an old nervous habit, steeled her face and flipped her hair back from her face instead. She turned completely, taking in the doors and the grates and the equipment scattered around.

She was ready. She had prepared and trained for anything Gobber could throw at her.

That Monstrous Nightmare was hers without a problem.

With that thought, she rolled her shoulders back and continued to walk forward.

"I hope I get some serious burns," Tuffnut said somewhere behind her.

"I'm hoping for some mauling. Like, on my shoulder or lower back," Ruffnut said.

"Yeah," Astrid agreed with as carefree a voice as she could muster. She was excited, but she could not afford to show it. Tough and

determined and unafraid. That was the image she needed to show, because pretending sometimes made thoughts reality. She repeated her brother's favourite phrase, "It's only fun if you get a scar out of it."

"Yeah, no kidding, right?" a very nasal voice mumbled.

No way. She turned around to look at the passage and her mouth fell open slightly. It should not have been a surprise, really. Hiccup was there, just like every other young teen. He was the chief's son, and it was only right. He would die, maybe, but he was supposed to be there.

"Pain," he added as he hefted his single-headed axe in both of his hands. "Love it." He gave a small shrug and eye-roll.

They had shared almost the same exchange the day before. Perhaps it had been exactly the same. It would have been an inside joke if they were friends. She closed her mouth and wondered if it were too early in the relationship for inside jokes.

Hiccup met her eyes briefly and looked away.

Should she laugh?

"Aw, great," Tuffnut said. "Who let him in?"

He met her eyes again and looked down, dejected. He changed his grip on his axe and held it close to his body, seemingly protecting himself from further remarks.

"Let's get started!" Gobber said.

Hiccup looked at his mentor with wide eyes.

"The recruit who does best will win the honour of killing his first dragon in front of the entire village," Gobber said, punctuating his words with a twist of his hook.

Hiccup jumped slightly when the metal clicked and held his axe even closer.

He was like a frightened little bird. His body language could not make it more obvious that he wanted to be anywhere else.

"Hiccup already killed a Night Fury," Snotlout said in that obnoxious drawl of his.

Astrid glared at him.

"So...Does that disqualify him, or?"

Ruffnut and Tuffnut snickered at Snotlout's little joke, and even Fishlegs chuckled.

Astrid merely shook her head and turned away. As far as she was concerned, Hiccup was nice. He may have been always in the wrong place at the wrong time, but that did not mean he deserved taunting from his peers. Criticism would have helped, but not cruelty. It suddenly occurred to her that she should have defended him. If she

was trying to be his friend again, she should take his side, right?

"Can I transfer to the class with the cool Vikings?" Tuffnut asked.

Snotlout ran up beside her and chuckled. "That was a good one. Man, I crack myself up."

"That makes one of you," she mumbled.

"What?"

Ruffnut ran up between them. "I just can't believe he's \_here\_."

Astrid shrugged and stopped in the middle of the Ring with her back to the gate. "It's Stoick's decision."

That put an end to the comments.

Tuffnut stood on her other side, and he held up his spear with his usual mischievous grin.

She took a deep breath and stared ahead. There was no time to think about Hiccup or anything else of minor importance. Dragon Training would begin at any moment, and she had to be ready.

She could see six doors in front of her, but she knew there were others outside of her peripheral.

Gobber walked into her view and she tightened her grip on her axe as her heart began to pound in her ears.

"Behind these doors are just a few of the many species you will learn to fight," Gobber said. He walked over to a set of doors shaped like a house with a huge beam across and gestured dramatically. "The Deadly Nadder."

"Speed eight, armour sixteen," said a voice that could only be Fishlegs.

She shook her head slightly as if she could dislodge the voice as easily as she could scare off an annoying fly.

Gobber passed a square door, and she took a moment to wonder what was behind it and why he had not told them before snapping her attention back to their teacher. He gestured to a double arched door. Twin heads. She could easily guess what was behind that door.

"The Hideous Zippleback," Gobber said.

"Plus eleven stealth times two," Fishlegs said.

What in Hel's name did that even mean? And where was Hiccup?

Astrid squeezed her eyes and opened them again, reminding herself to focus.

"The Monstrous Nightmare," Gobber announced when he passed a large

square door with a vertical beam.

Her pulse began to race. She knew that one. That was always the most exciting part during the kill. The Monstrous Nightmare would burst from those exact doors, seeming to set the wood on fire, ready to attack. In just two weeks, she would be standing in the same spot, waiting for those doors to open, ready to make her own mark.

She was so busy thinking about her future battle, she failed to hear Fishlegs' statistical announcement.

Gobber walked up to a circular door. "The Terrible Terror."

She knew about Terrible Terrors. She had read the Dragon Manual. They did not come with raids, but they were common and pesky. She thought that there was an awful lot of door for such a small dragon. Unless there was a whole group of them hiding in the cell.

"Attack eight! Venom twelve!" Fishlegs announced.

"Can you stop that?" Gobber snapped before regaining his composure and walking up to a domed door. "And..." He put his hand on a lever just to the side of the door. "The Gronckle."

"Whaâ€"Whoa!" Snotlout ran forward from the line. "Whoa! Wait! Aren't you gonna teach us first?"

Her breath caught in her lungs. Oh, gods. No one had warned her. She had been expecting a run-down of tactics. Maybe attacking some wooden dummies or talking about the weaknesses and strengths of each dragon...

She glanced to her left and saw that Ruffnut's eyes were wide. She glanced to her right and saw that Tuffnut and Fishlegs were making similar expressions, but Hiccup looked positively sick, as if he had completely expected everything but did not feel prepared at all.

Well, he \_had \_ spent a good deal of time with Gobber.

The broad man grinned. "I believe in learning on the job." He yanked down on the lever.

She turned and bolted before the doors had opened. Her mind started racing. Was she allowed to kill the dragon on accident? Would she be disqualified if her first kill was not a Monstrous Nightmare? Was the Gronckle after her?

She glanced back over her left shoulder and saw that everyone else was running, except for Hiccup, who was long gone.

She had not even seen him take off.

Well, he had been expecting it, obviously. She had to give him credit for reflexes.

"Today is about survival," Gobber said in a calm voice, as if he were reciting a fish recipe.

Oh, there was the Gronckle. It was headed her way. She dove to her

left and turned around to take a ready stance and saw that the dragon had crashed into a wall.

"If you get blasted..."

The dragon scuttled its tiny legs to get back up and swallowed a couple of rubble rocks on the ground.

"You're dead," Gober continued.

Rocks were ammunition for Gronckles. They melted the stone in their stomachs, and spewed out fire and molten rock, like a volcano. She knew she had best stay clear for a few minutes.

"Quick!" Gobber shouted. "What's the first thing you're going to need?"

"A doctor?" Hiccup called out somewhere to her right. It was a funny remark, but rather than make her feel like laughing, the comment irked her. The Ring was not the place for jokes.

"Plus five speed?" Fishlegs asked. What in Midgard was that even supposed to mean?

"A shield!" she said with confidence. That much was obvious.

"Shields! Go!" Gobber said.

She looked to the wall behind her and saw a nice row of round, wooden shields propped against the stone. She dashed over and grabbed one off the wall as Snotlout came up beside her and grabbed another. She ran away, toward the gate, as she secured her grip on her shield.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Gobber saying something to Hiccup as he forced a shield on the boy's left arm.

The twins were fighting, which was no surprise. Fishlegs was running from the Gronckle with his hands high in the air as the dragon closely chased him.

She bit her lip and looked away to keep from laughing.

Dragon Training was not comical

She heard a loud explosion followed by Gobber drawling, "Tuffnut, Ruffnut, you're out."

"Those shields are good for another thing," Gobber said as Fishlegs grabbed a shield and joined the small circle of survivors. "Noise. Make lots of it to throw off a dragon's aim."

She leaned forward and banged her axe against the side of her shield. She saw Hiccup to her left as he backed up. Snotlout ducked behind his shield and continued to warily peek out from behind it with wide eyes as he hit the metal center with his morning star. After a few moments of deafening clanging and banging, Fishlegs seemed to catch on and jumped up and down as he hit his shield above his head.

The Gronckle growled a bit and started to shake its head and flinch.

"All dragons have a limited number of shots," Gobber said. "How many does a Gronckle have?"

She stopped banging on her shield and broke into a run.

"Five?" Snotlout yelled.

"No, six!" Fishlegs said.

"Correct!" Gobber said. "Six! That's one for each of you!"

She reached the other side of the arena as she heard a loud explosion followed by Gobber's drawling, "Fishlegs, out."

The boy screamed as he ran out of the ring.

Her eyes darted around and saw the Gronckle headed toward a wooden weapon stand.

"Hiccup! Get in there!" Gobber shouted.

Hiccup stuck his head out from behind the stand, his axe clutched in his right hand.

She had a vague memory of being taught to write as a child. She had naturally picked up charcoal with her right hand, but Hiccup had always tried to use his left hand, and the village elders had finally forced him to use his right by tying his left arm to his side. He had stared at the bit of charcoal in his right hand and had bit his lip, his brow furrowed in concentration. He had tried so hard, and he had not cried when he could not form the letters as well, even though others had cried when they were using their natural hands.

Perhaps they had finally broken him of using his left hand. That was good. Some said that left-handedness was a mark of a changeling. She did not believe in changelings herself, it was a silly superstition from the mainland, but left-handedness was weird.

Go figure that Hiccup would have been born that way.

He yelped and ducked behind it when the Gronckle fired a shot at his head.

She counted down in her head. One at the twins, one at Fishlegs, one at Hiccup...Three shots left.

The Gronckle seemed to grow bored of Hiccup's cowering and turned around.

"So, anyway," Snotlout said behind her.

When had he appeared?

"I moved into my parents' basement..."

What was he talkingâ€"Oh, no. The Gronckle had noticed them. Did Snotlout not know to stand in groups? Single people were harder to

hit, but if all the Vikings were in a clump, they were a larger target!

Hiccup was a weird coward, and Snotlout was an idiot.

"You should come by sometime to work out."

The Gronckle was headed for them. She took a step to her side. Two more steps and she would dive into a somersault, and tumble back to regain her footing, just like she had practiced. It was a quick evasive maneuver that covered more ground and was also distracting for an enemy. A single bee-line was easy to predict, but tumble rolls made movement harder to predict.

And...she jumped too soon. She had not even had her foot solidly on the ground, her ankle had twisted slightly, and she had fallen into the somersault rather than diving into it. She tried to roll backwards quickly, but she did not have enough momentum to follow through well enough and had to actually employ her stomach into lifting herself. Well, that had just been a bungled mess.

There was a loud explosion and Gobber called, "Snotlout, you're done!"

One more try. She had to redeem herself. She jumped off a sound foot, dove forward, rolled over her shoulders, twisted around as she landed, and let motion carry her back, over, and up...Perfect. She sidestepped a few times.

The Gronckle was headed her way again. There were two shots left...If she could just hold it off, for those two, maybe dodge them, she could take it down.

"So..." Hiccup said.

Hiccup. She had landed by Hiccup. Which equaled a larger target. Her eyes darted up and she noticed the Elder standing and watching.

That session mattered.

The Gronckle was still flying toward them

"I guess it's just you and me, huh?"

Was he...Was he \_serious\_? Trying to get friendly when a dragon was headed their way?

She took everything back. Hiccup was \_exactly\_ like Snotlout.

And while most of her hated herself for what she was about to do, that realization brought a small amount of comfort.

"Nope," she said. "Just you." She dashed away from him.

She heard a loud explosion and the sound of a metal shield hitting the ground. That, she had no doubt, was Hiccup. He was out, the dragon would follow her, she would dodge the last shot, subdue the dragon...

"One shot left..." Gobber said.

"Alright," she murmured. "Here it comes...here it comes!" She turned around, ready to face the dragon and jump out of the way as it fired its last shot.

But it was not there. The dragon was on the other side of the ring and was chasing Hiccup, who was chasing his shield, which was rolling toward the wall.

It would have been a funny sight if Hiccup had not been about to \_die\_.

Her brief resentment dissipated as she realized that they might lose a future chief that day. Maybe Hiccup was not so much like Snotlout. Maybe he had just been attempting at friendship, even if the ring was hardly the right place to do so. Could he have not waited? Could he haveâ€"but never the mind. She was not about to let Snotlout become the heir to the tribe. While he certainly would have been a stronger chief, Hiccup would be a smarter one. Maybe. He would definitely be more tolerable.

Hiccup backed against the wall and the Gronckle opened its jaws.

Oh, gods...

"Hiccup!" Gobber shouted.

She started forward, but the older man was running as well and reached Hiccup and the dragon, stuck his hook in the Gronckle's mouth, and yanked hard just as the Gronckle released its final shot.

The fire blasted into the wall, stirring up a cloud of shrapnel and dust. For a brief moment, there was silence.

Oh, dear Freyja...Hiccup was dead.

"And that's six," Gobber said casually.

Astrid let out a breath she did not realize she had been holding. If Gobber was calm, then the situation was fine. Hiccup was alive.

The cloud cleared and she could see his tiny frame huddled in a small ball with his arms over his head.

The fact that he was nice did not change the fact that he was a coward.

"Go back to bed, you overgrown sausage." Gobber swung the beast around in a circle and flung it into the open cell. He quickly closed the doors and flipped the lever that bolted them shut. The doors rattled and the Gronckle bellowed in rage. "You'll get another chance, don't you worry!"

The others came alongside her.

"Remember," Gobber said, "a dragon will always..." He turned to Hiccup, who had not moved. "\_Always \_go for the kill." He grabbed the boy's arm and yanked him up.



Hiccup looked behind him at the wall that was still smoldering.

He was nice and smart, but he was a coward. He was barely more tolerable than his cousin, who was brazen and obnoxious. And narcissistic.

Hiccup turned his head away from the wall, and she was shocked to see that his face looked pensive.

What was wrong with him? She took her earlier thought back: he was not smart. Intellectual, sure. She'd give him that. But a normal, smart human would be terrified after almost getting roasted by a dragon. A smart person would not be thoughtful. A smart person would not look as if he were puzzling out some great mystery.

What was there to puzzle out anyway? Dragons killed people. Surely Hiccup could get that through his stupid head.

Gobber rubbed at the back of his neck. "Meet in the Great Hall for dinner," he said. He started toward the gate. "Don't be late."

\* \* \*

><p>"You could have warned me about Gobber."<p>

Grimefoot grinned as he opened the bag of salt and rubbed the white grains on the inside of the flayed salmon in front of him. "No one warns about that. That's half the fun. It's..." He rubbed his nose with the back of his hand.

"Initiation," Kata finished as she salted her own fish.

Astrid sliced another thin ring from the cored apple and dipped the ring into the drying solution, a mixture of juices and just a little brine. She slid the ring onto the string holding forty other slices and tied a loose loop around it to keep it in place. They would hang the apples near the fire, away from the smoke so the fruit dried but kept its sweetness.

"Besides," Kata said, "it would be unfair if you had an advantage."

"I already have an advantage," Astrid replied.

Grimefoot shook his head. "They won't pick you just because you're a legacy."

"No," Astrid agreed. "They'll pick me because I'm the best." It was not a boast. It was a fact. She had slipped up a few times. She had not been as quick or coordinated as she would have liked, but she was still the only one standing in the end. That had to count for something.

"I'm sure the Elder would agree with that," Kata said kindly.

Astrid smiled. She may not have been at her personal best, but at least she had been better than everyone else.

Still, everyone had been decent. They had all survived, after all. They had been surviving all their lives. Diseases and cold and war

had taken other children, kids of whom she had hazy memories from when she had been five or six. Few children survived to see the Ring. In fact, due to losses over the years, there had only been two competitors the year before: Dustmite Haraldsson and Squabble Hoarksson, both silly girls who preferred smiling at older boys like Blackmire Liefson, who had come in second to Thorhalla two years before. But they had survived to see the Ring, and they had survived the Ring itself. They all had, and that in itself was no mean feat.

It made her wonder how on earth he was still alive. He probably would have been long gone, had Stoick not kept him under lock and key.

"Who? Hiccup?" Grimefoot asked and she realized she had spoken aloud.

"Of course he protects him," Kata said. "As I parent, I know. You'd do anything to protect your children and family. And after Stoick's wife...well...you know."

Astrid nodded. Of course she knew about that. Everyone knew.

"It's no wonder he keeps him locked up tight," Kata continued.

"That," Grimefoot said. "And it's just better for everyone if he stays out of things." He reached across the table and took the ring Astrid had just cut from the cored apple. He bit into it and smiled.

Astrid gave him her best annoyed look.

He shrugged. "It's one ring. Mom won't notice or care."

"You've had nine," Kata said. "This is your tenth."

"Mom will notice and care that there's a whole apple's worth missing," Astrid said.

He picked up a small lump of stuck salt and threw it at her. It hit her between the eyes and he grinned at her.

She grinned back. True, she might not be ensured the honour of killing the Monstrous Nightmare because of her family legacy, but her family had certainly had a hand in securing that right. A loving, supportive family that had spent time with her, taught her, and raised her to be the best.

She was the best. And that was precisely why she would win.

\* \* \*

><p>She had been determined. She really had been.<p>

Hiccup was nice. His inability to recognize proper situations and social cues was a minor failing that could easily be overlooked if they were to be friends.

And she had been determined that they would be friends.

It had suddenly occurred to her as she was stringing apples that while the gods had been kind to her and given her a huge, loving and supportive family, the gods had not been so good to him.

His mother was not around anymore, and his father was taking care of other things and probably did not have the energy to expend on his own son at the end of the day.

The sad fact of the matter was that no one really bothered with Hiccup. No one bothered with teaching or instructing him, since it was just easier to push him out of sight.

But she had decided that she would bother. If they were to be friends, a good starting point would be giving him some much-needed direction.

And she really had been determined. She had shown up early just to talk to him. He had not been in the Great Hall yet, but that had not mattered. She had sat down at a table, she had filled a plate from the spits over the fire, she had taken a cup of water.

Hiccup had not shown.

The twins had arrived and slid onto the bench beside her. Fishlegs had arrived and sat across from Ruffnut and had started casting very quick and nervous glances her direction.

But there had been no sign of Snotlout or Hiccup. They were late, and that fact had irked Astrid to the point of restlessness. Maybe Hiccup was just like Snotlout—self-entitled and cocky. He was nice, but being the chief's son would make anyone a little too big in the head. Perhaps that was why he always tried to take down dragons, not from a lack of confidence, but from an overconfidence.

And then Gobber had marched through the doors, strode up to the fire, and filled the mug attached to his arm. He had taken one large gulp and glanced around. "Where's Snotlout?"

Everyone had shrugged, and Astrid had furrowed her brow. Why just Snotlout? Had Hiccup dropped out? Surely he had, or else Gobber would have asked after him too. Honestly, that was better for everyone. He would not be around to mess things up.

But that thought did irk her. Did he expect that they would take care of the dragons while he watched? Or worse, continued to get involved and drive the whole island to destruction?

"Well, let's get started." Gobber took another gulp from his mug and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand as he started to pace slowly around the table. He set an extra plate down on a corner of the table and cleared his throat. "I think it's safe to say everyone here needs a little improvement, eh?" He chuckled to himself. "Alright, Fishlegs. Let's talk about you first."

Fishlegs looked down at his hands and mumbled something inaudible.

"What did he do wrong?" Gobber asked before holding up a finger. "And remember, we all have things we can work on. So let's make this

\_constructive\_." He stopped directly behind the twins.

Tuffnut grinned. "He screamed and ran like a girl!"

"Constructive!" Gobber said as he smacked the boy on the back of the head.

Ruffnut met Astrid's eyes for a moment and then looked at her brother. "And how does a girl scream, puke-breath?"

Astrid smiled. Berkian women did not hold with stereotypes. There were some Viking women, like the ones in Iceland, who were not even allowed to hold weapons, but Berkian women were warriors and could easily hold their own against men.

"Like Fishlegs," Tuffnut replied.

"He wasn't focused," Astrid said.

"Exactly," Gobber said as he approached Fishlegs. "Focus is important. If you lose your focus, one minute you could be fighting, and the next, you could wind up!"

"Like Hiccup," Tuffnut finished.

Gobber gave him a lidded look. "Dead." He grinned slowly. "You seem eager. Let's talk about Tuffnut."

Tuffnut leaned forward. "I would not have gotten out if she hadn't been in the way." He gestured to his sister.

Gobber seemed to ponder this. "You did get out at the same time...Let's talk about the both of you, then."

Ruffnut grabbed her brother's head and pushed it to the side.

Gobber took a deep gulp from his mug. "Anything to say, Fishlegs?"

"Ah, no!" Fishlegs jumped slightly. "I mean, no."

Astrid rolled her eyes. "They were too busy fighting."

Ruffnut shot her a glare and Astrid straightened her back and took a sip of water.

"Right." Gobber nodded. "They let their personal problems affect their performance." The doors to the hall opened, and everyone looked up to watch as Snotlout sauntered toward the table while whistling, but Gobber continued. "In training, we will get to teamwork, but it is essential that you trust your partners and don't take your personal feelings into the fight. And you are late," he finished as Snotlout shoved Fishlegs over and sat down with his own plate of food and cup.

Snotlout shrugged and grinned at Astrid. She rolled her eyes and looked back at her plate, which was empty except for a couple bones. He could honestly be so...

"And while we're in the business of talking about where we all need improvement," Gobber said, "we can start with your timeliness."

Snotlout snorted. "Like I need improvement. He wagged his eyebrows at Astrid. "Am I right?"

Gobber pushed the boy's head down hard into the table. "Delusions of grandeur are not excuse for being late."

Snotlout sat up while rubbing his forehead and rolled his eyes. "Chill out."

"So," Gobber leaned in close. "We'll start with your need to try. You're no better than anyone else, so you can't go around acting like you are." He poked Snotlout between his eyes. "In fact, I'd say you have the most to work on."

Astrid smiled. She really liked Gobber. He was slightly crazy and had his far-fetched stories, but he would definitely be able to knock Snotlout down a few notches. She could never manage that, and not for lack of trying.

Gobber straightened. "Anyone else want to say something?"

"He didn't use his brain," Tuffnut offered.

"Not that he really has much of one," Ruffnut said.

"Attitude?" Fishlegs asked. Snotlout glared at him, and he quickly looked away while murmuring, "I mean, I don't know..."

"Right, Fishlegs!" Gobber clapped Fishlegs on the shoulder and the boy looked up with a sort of awe. "Attitude is a major problem! Anyone else?"

"He spent his time flirting," Ruffnut said.

"He wasn't focused," Astrid corrected. She ignored Ruffnut's look and continued, "He let his personal agenda get in the way."

"Well, looks like you have everyone else's problems and then your own." Gobber nodded.

Gobber nodded. "Alright, where did Astrid go wrong in the ring today?"

She smiled. She had not done anything wrong. Unlike Snotlout, she actually had been perfect. Except...She tightened her grip on her cup. "I mistimed my somersault dive. It was sloppy. It threw off my reverse tumble."

"Yeah," Ruffnut said sarcastically. "We noticed."

Astrid shot her a glare, and Ruffnut rolled her eyes and looked away. Astrid felt a small, tight heat at the back of her neck, as if she had done something wrong. If she were honest with herself, she had probably been acting a little bit annoying as she had corrected anyone. But she had merely answered the questions, and that was hardly wrong, so she rolled her eyes back and took a sip of

water.

"No! No, you were great!" Snotlout said. "That was so Astrid..."

She noticed a movement that drew her gaze to the door. Hiccup. Hiccup was walking toward them with his head low. She watched him over her cup.

Late. He was late.

At least he had the decency to look embarrassed.

"She's right," Gobber said. "You have to be tough on yourselves."

Gobber did not mention Hiccup. Maybe he really had dropped out. Maybe the boy was just coming to get food. His father was gone, after all. He had to be lonely in that big house...

Hiccup reached over to grab the plate Gobber had set down earlier. A single chicken thigh and leg. Doubtless it was cold by now. Why did he not go get some fresh food from the fire? What Gobber had put out for him could hardly be

Gobber had put the plate out for Hiccup. Hiccup had not dropped out. Hiccup was simply late. Soaking and late.

And Gobber had not said anything.

Snotlout moved over to block Hiccup from sitting and flashed an obnoxious grin.

Astrid set her cup down. Her earlier assessment had been correct. He really did expect that he could just watch as everyone else did the work as long as he could take credit for being involved in some way. He was just as self-entitled as his cousin. But the difference was that Hiccup could get away with such behaviour since people generally ignored his existence. And that was not right. Astrid believed in justice. Everyone should receive the same treatment, regardless of status.

"Where did Hiccup go wrong?"

Hiccup continued walking and ignored Snotlout's antics.

She glanced away for the briefest moment. Ah. Time for equal treatment.

"Uh, he showed up?" Ruffnut said.

Tuffnut grinned. "He didn't get eaten."

Hiccup reached out and grabbed a random cup off the table. It happened to be Fishlegs', but the large boy did not seem to care as he was far too busy scooting away from Snotlout, who had slid over to block Hiccup once more. Hiccup did not even bother trying to sit, though. He seemed to understand that he was not welcome.

And as far as she was concerned, those who thought they were a cut above the rest were never welcome. "He's never where he should

be."

Hiccup slowed his pace and turned his head slightly: the only acknowledgement that he had heard anything.

"Thank you, Astrid," Gobber said.

Hiccup set his food down on the table next to theirs and sat on the bench. With his upturned nose and freckles and big eyes, he looked like a petulant child.

She looked down at her empty plate. She did not need to be friends with him anyway. She was fine on her own.

"You need to live and breathe this stuff," Gobber said.

She looked up at Gobber, who was looking back at Hiccup. The boy ignored the man and merely nudged his cold cut of chicken.

Gobber pulled a book from a nearby table. "The Dragon Manual." He used his mug hand to push aside the plates and slammed the book down. "Everything we know about every dragon we know of."

Astrid sat straighter. She had read the Manual before. Twice.

Thunder sounded outside and she looked up. She had not noticed the rain start to fall, though Hiccup's state had been a sure sign.

Gobber sighed. "No attacks tonight." As he walked away from their group, he called over his shoulder, "Study up."

She looked down. A third reading would definitely help. She figured she was a bit rusty on her knowledge of some rarer species.

"Wait," Tuffnut said. "You mean \_read\_?"

She looked to her side.

"While we're still alive?" Ruffnut asked.

Astrid looked away from the twins and shook her head. They really needed to learn to work and take things seriously. Their immaturity would put them behind.

"Why read words when you can just kill the stuff the words tell you stuff about?" Snotlout said, punctuating his words by banging his fist on the table.

Fishlegs bounced in his seat. "Oh! I've read it, like, seven times! There's this water dragon that sprays boiling water at your face."

Astrid raised an eyebrow. That was a Scauldron. Her brother Cloutbeard had a scar on his back from a fight with one.

Snotlout looked at Fishlegs as if he had grown two extra heads.

"And there's this other one that, like, buries itself for, like, a

week andâ€"

She knew that one as well. A Whispering Death. Cloutbeard had almost lost a leg to one a few years before.

"Yeah." Tuffnut clamped his fingers together to cut off Fishlegs. "That sounds great. There was a chance I was gonna read that..." He leaned back and looked at his sister.

Right on cue, she finished, "But...now?" Ruffnut shrugged, unimpressed, and rolled her eyes with a slight smirk.

Snotlout stood. "You guys read, I'll go kill stuff."

The twins and Fishlegs joined him as the latter continued to babble about dragons. She could not hear which dragon he was describing, but she was willing to bet that, whatever it was, her brother had a scar from one.

As she watched them go, she felt that she might be the only one their age fully prepared to tackle the challenge ahead of them.

Suddenly, she noticed Hiccup approaching. She huffed and fought to keep herself from rolling her eyes.

"So..." Hiccup began in a very familiar way. "I guess we'll...share?"

She shoved the book at him. "Read it." She stood up and started to follow the others. Like Hel she'd hang around with only Hiccup. She was far too annoyed to deal with that stupid nasal mumble and stupid upturned nose and stupid freckles.

She did not really need to read the book again anyway.

Later that night, as she lay in her bed with the many layers of furs, she let her mind wander back to him. The thoughts agitated like a rash or a flea bite.

Maybe she had been a bit too mean and quick to judge. Maybe he did expect that everyone else could take care of the dragons. It was a logical thought. She supposed that if she were as scrawny and as useless as he was she would think the same way. And maybe he was a little arrogant because he was the chief's son. But at least he was not arrogant in the same way Snotlout was. Hiccup never put people down. He was not a jerk. He was nice. Useless, but nice.

But would it kill him to try?

Yeah, it probably would.

But they were Vikings. It was an occupational hazard.

At least Snotlout tried, for all that he was annoying and stupid and mean.

Well. That was certainly the first time she had found a redeeming quality about Snotlout.

She let out a laugh.



"Shut up," Grimefoot groaned from the bed next to hers.

She rolled over on her side. Earlier that day she had made the decision to help him. Tomorrow, she decided, she would stick by that decision. She would let Gobber work on knocking him down a few pegs. But she would teach him. He would never be competitive in the ring, but at least she could help him get to the point of not being a laughing stock. They would probably never be friends, but she could at least get him to try.

**\*\*Yes, I realize that I left lines out in this chapter, but I'm really only putting in what I think Astrid would hear. Also, I feel that Astrid and Hiccup work together because they push each other to become better, whether they mean to or not. Hiccup's obviously the more encouraging one and Astrid's the more aggressive one, but they bring out the best in each other. Iron sharpens iron and all that. And I hope that partly explains why I put in the scene at the beginning. I mean, I'll obviously refer to it later. I allude to it in **\*\*\_\*\*Here Be Dragons.\*\*\_\*\*** So, all of my reasonings will come out eventually. And I know I took absolutely no stance on Hiccup's mother's fate. And I don't intend to. Not in this fic, at least. Also, I made a reference to Hiccup possibly being right-handed. Because I happened to notice that while he writes with his left and uses his left hand when he's alone, he tends to use his right hand when he's with other people. So I played around with that for a moment. Headcannons. Also, I don't see Astrid and Ruffnut as close friends. I see them as those obligatory friends you have because you're in the same math class. They have to be friends because they're the only girls their age, but I do not at all think they're buddies. Or that they even particularly like each other. I believe Astrid thinks Ruffnut needs to grow up and start taking things seriously, and I believe Ruffnut thinks Astrid needs to just get over herself. And I really do hope that came out in the last scene...But I do think Astrid is projecting her worst qualities onto Hiccup. We get annoyed the most by our own problems we think are mirrored in others. And I do believe that Astrid is just a little bit...fourteen. Or thirteen. And I think we all know middle school. You're friends with someone one moment, and then she doesn't return your pencil and your friendship is so totally over. I think Astrid needs better reasons than that, but she is sort of fickle. I mean, if you watch her, she has so many turn-arounds in the movie. She goes from generally ignoring his existence to being annoyed with him to trying to get him out of her way to screaming at him to looking at him apologetically across the campfire to being amazed with his weird abilities to getting very jealous/frustrated. Yes. Frustrated. And those are all very subtle, but they are definitely changes in behaviour and thought. And of course, we're all familiar with the dramatic change in the clouds. The point is, I think she's very changeable. I think she's the sort of person who would quickly change her mind if she had reason and I think she's the sort of person who would stab you in the back or tell everyone about your pet dragon if she thought it was for the greater good. I think her personal loyalties would develop as she grew older as a result of being influenced by Hiccup. And I think his understanding of sacrifice and the greater good would expand as well. As I said way up at the top of this paragraph, they make each other better.\*\***

**\*\*Today I decided that the only thing I absolutely need to happen in HTTYD2, like what must happen or I might cry, is someone's gesturing**

to all of Hiccup. That's it. Just once. I don't care if he finds it insulting or endearing, someone had better gesture to all of him or I will throw a tantrum that will put three-year-olds to shame.\*\*

\*\*As a super cool fun fact, there is no archaeological evidence that Viking women were warriors. In fact, most evidence seems to point to a division in that part of life. Sagas talk about shield maidens, so it is entirely possible that women were involved in war in the early years of cultural development, but there is no concrete proof of this. In some places, we know women were allowed to hold swords to defend their homes, but in others, like Iceland, women were forbidden from holding weapons at all, and such a crime would be punishable by death. Did this mean a woman had no chance of entering Valhalla or Folkvangr? Not necessarily. Many scholars and anthropologists have suggested that a woman could still get to one of these realms by fulfilling her own duties: getting married, having children, keeping a home...or at least trying. Vikings were smart enough to realize that sometimes women just flat out could not have children (and that sometimes it was actually the man's fault, which was a very forward concept for the time), and they did have provision in place in case of such circumstances. The sad truth is that since the dawn of time there has never been a culture that allowed men and women total equal standing in society. Even matriarchal and matrilineal societies defer to men. The Vikings were certainly more progressive than their European contemporaries, though, as can be seen in laws. Women could hold property and even have votes in some societies, women could be rulers in some societies, rape of a free woman was viewed as a heinous crime, and spousal abuse was not tolerated, which honestly benefits both sexes. And...oh, my gosh. I should never talk about anthropology again. I'm finished.\*\*

\*\*Still on the lookout for a Beta if anyone is interested. I know school is back in session, but if you'd still be willing, shoot me a PM!\*\*

\*\*I wrote this while listening to Chameleon Circuit. Wrong fandom, I know. But I'm already gearing up for November.\*\*

\*\*Leave a review if it suits your fancy. Don't if it doesn't. I'm not big on demanding them.\*\*

End  
file.